

The Philosophy of Number ¹

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The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got - Marx & Engels

The foundation of power is somewhere other than this or that person or this or that dynasty, which could be said to incarnate it. If God is absent, there are only human beings left, and the matter of sovereignty - its foundation - can only be elucidated among them. Sovereignty is a human not a divine matter- Gerard Mairet

But now our requirements have changed, and the facts have changed behind us - Hilary Mantel

Introduction

It is difficult to judge which is the more grievous of our predicaments: the acceptability (for a large number of Indians) of mass murder as a fact of life; or our unwillingness to understand communalism outside of a communal lens. To put it differently, many people consider the theft of money to be a greater evil than the assassination of large numbers of people; and even when we try to understand genocidal events, most of the time we end up with a variant of the proposition that 'my murderers are better than yours.' And in a country where even atheists are cast as Hindu, Muslim or Sikh etc, an obsessive awareness of

¹ This essay builds upon my long-standing argument about the fascist nature of Indian communalism. It also uses material from my earlier work. The title is a phrase used by Maulana Mohammad Ali in 1911, cited in Shabnam Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950*; Bloomington, 2008; p 170. The master quotes are from Gerard Mairet; *The Fable of the World: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freedom in Our Times*; Calcutta, 2010, p 53-54; Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; and Hilary Mantel; *Bring Up the Bodies*; London, 2012, p 238

religious identity tends to colour all discourses, even theoretical ones, about communalism – ‘my communalists are not as bad as yours’, or even, ‘my communalists are not communalists at all, yours are.’ Despite the terrible tragedies that have convulsed South Asia over the past century, it appears we are no closer to an understanding of the most intractable issue in modern Indian history than we were seven decades ago. Our consciences and minds are held in a vice-like grip, and the very vocabulary of our utterances only generates misconception, self-deceit and further animus. Incessant violence and hatred have resulted in a nihilist situation.

In the period between the two assaults on the Babri Masjid, there took place a political conversation in the office of the Indian Peoples’ Front, a front organization (now defunct), of the CPI (ML). A prominent leader of the ML party was hosting a discussion on contemporary issues with public intellectuals. The conversation veered to the matter of Advani’s 1990 Rath Yatra - Advani’s arrest had led to the downfall of the V.P. Singh government. The Yatra had been obliged to skip Chhatisgarh, on account of the resistance of the Chhatisgarh Mukti Morcha led by Shankar Guha Niyogi, who was later assassinated. I asked the leader why, when Advani’s pilgrimage of hate could be turned away from Chhatisgarh by strong workers resistance, the CPI (ML) did not turn it away from the areas in Bihar where it had its strongest mass movements. The answer was symptomatic of the leftist common sense about communalism. He replied that if the Party had done so, the ‘people would have assumed we were siding with one community against the other.’ For this theoretician, the issue was (by implication) not one of upholding lawful government or the constitutional obligation to protect historical monuments; rather, what was happening was a conflict between communities. It did not call for a defence of democracy against mob violence, or an exposure of the claims of communal groups to ‘represent’ entire communities, it was a Hindu-Muslim issue, and the best way out of it was to get ‘community leaders’ to sort it out amicably. Since the communist position on bourgeois democracy is deeply ambivalent, its position on fascism is equally compromised. However, Indian communists have not theorized fascism at all, so

the comrades' position reflected the stance of an entire spectrum of left opinion on communalism.

My attempt in this essay is to place some fresh ideas on this debate. If there is a political and philosophical corollary to these ideas, it is a plea for moderate speech. Extreme positions and hyperbolic utterances have become commonplace these days, and very often emanate from the heart of the establishment. It is doubtful whether meaningful communication is taking place on burning questions ranging from public security, political violence and police reform, to women's rights, education and criminal justice. Activists of mainstream political parties have been known engage in hooliganism, and attacks on the freedom of speech and expression have become the norm. It is arguable that the Indian constitution is under threat, not only from declared insurgents, but equally from the actions (and inaction) of persons sworn to uphold it. The important questions are not reducible to party politics, and answers to them cannot be found in partisan manifestos. It is not a Party but a platform of political moderation and social democracy that is lacking. What we need to question are commonsensical notions, the vocabulary in use by all protagonists, the concepts that rule without challenge in the domain of ideas. These concepts include *nation*, *majority*, and *minority*. Let us begin with a quick look at a little-known report from one of the most violent and tragic periods in Indian history.

A line in the ground

In September 1947, two Indian communists presented a report to Jawaharlal Nehru that was later published under the title *Bleeding Punjab Warns*. They began with a mention of one of their comrade-witnesses, 'Baba Gurmukh Singh, veteran revolutionary who had put in 27 years in imperialist prisons and whose blood was boiling at the way Punjab was reduced to bloody shambles..' and continued:

what happened in the Punjab cannot be called a riot. It was a regular war of extermination of the minorities, of the Sikhs and Hindus in

Western Punjab and of Muslims in East Punjab. It cannot be compared to Calcutta or Noakhali, Bihar, or even to Rawalpindi for in all these cases it was mobs of one community that took leading part in killing, looting and burning the minority in the area, their communal passions being roused to a pitch of frenzy and savagery.. In the Punjab, however, in the recent biggest killing ever seen, it was the trained bands equipped with firearms and modern weapons that were the main killers, looters and rapers. These were the storm troops of various communal parties such as National Guards of the Muslim League in the Western Punjab, and the Shahidi Dal of the Akalis and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh of the Mahasabha in the Eastern Punjab. They were actively aided and often actually led by the police and the military in committing the worst atrocities.. in violence and in brutality, in the numbers killed (which Syt Shri Prakasha, India's Ambassador to Pakistan places at 1 ½ lakhs) in the use of plenty of modern deadly weapons, in the devastation spread over 14 districts of the Punjab and in the way in which the police, the military and the entire administration was geared not to stop the riots but to spread it – the Punjab tragedy is without parallel..²

The report describes numerous instances of atrocities carried out by the militias of various parties, as well as the extensive material support (including rifles, hand grenades, sten-guns, mortars and jeeps) given to them by the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh princely states of Punjab, including Patiala, Jhind, Nabha, Faridkot, Malerkotla, Bahawalpur and Kapurthala. It describes these states as ‘the hotbeds...of cold deadly preparations for a war of extermination.’ Whereas the Congress ‘became more and more tongue-tied as it moved nearer and nearer acceptance of division,’ it reported the RSS as having taken over the towns, ‘and roused the spirit of retaliation on the communal slogan of Akhand Hindustan by force’. The report names ‘financiers and blackmarketeers of the towns’ as patrons

² *Bleeding Punjab Warns* by Dhanwantri & PC Joshi; PC Joshi Archives, (JNU), File CPI/108, p 5-6

of the RSS, and 'the most reactionary toady section of big landlords' as backing the Muslim League National Guards.

This account is only one of the myriad stories of the systematic mass murder that accompanied the birth of the two nation-states that had been incubated in the last decades of the British empire in India. Independence had been preceded by much bloodshed. Every decade since the 1890s had witnessed communal violence. By the 1940s the deliberate instigation of violence had begun. The Calcutta Killing of 1946, in which 5,000 to 10,000 people were killed, and up to 15,000 wounded, was a turning point. Precise figures for the numbers killed in 1947-48 are difficult to pin down, and could be half a million or more, with a further 13 million refugees, roughly evenly divided amongst Muslims and non-Muslims.³ The bulk of the casualties, as well as the refugee population, were Punjabis.

This violence was not a marginal phenomenon, or a sudden and spontaneous outburst of communal frenzy. As Lionel Baixas argues, 'it was on the contrary at the very heart of the event. Nor was it merely a consequence of Partition but rather the principal mechanism for creating the conditions for Partition. Violence constituted the moral instrument through which the tension between the pre-Partition local character of identity and its postcolonial territorial and national redefinition was negotiated. Violence operated as the link between the community and its new national territory.' It was what 'gave it its organized and genocidal dimension as it was meant for control of social space so as to cleanse these territories from the presence of other religious communities.'⁴ The crux of

³ The figure of one and a half lakhs dead in Punjab given by Dhanwantri in 1947 was clearly an underestimate. A new study of Punjab in 1947 cites figures ranging from six lakhs to a million, while stating that an overwhelming majority of these deaths took place in Punjab. (Ishtiaq Ahmad, *The Punjab: Bloodied, Partitioned & Cleansed*, New Delhi 2012, p xli). See also: *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*; Lionel Baixas, 'Thematic Chronology of Mass Violence in Pakistan, 1947-2007: Partition Massacres, 1946-1947':

<http://www.massviolence.org/Thematic-Chronology-of-Mass-Violence-in-Pakistan-1947-2007?decoupe_recherche=noakhali>

⁴ Baixas, *ibid*, 'Thematic Chronology of Mass Violence in Pakistan', p 2

the matter was the cleansing of territory, or the transfer of population, as it was then known. The birth of the nation-states of India and Pakistan took place amidst genocide.⁵ The process was governed by the arithmetic of the nation-state, an institution defined in terms of a natural majority and a problematic minority. It is this vocabulary and the politics generated by it that was absorbed and upheld by all actors on the political stage, including the communists.

Nation and State : the new arithmetic

In a provocative essay on the ideological lineage of fascism, the historian George Mosse observed that the French Revolution ‘put its stamp upon a novel view of the sacred: it created a civil religion which modern nationalism made its own, and fascism, whatever its variety, was, above all, a nationalist movement.’⁶ Nationalism has always covered a range of aspirations, from the yearning for social liberation on the part of oppressed people, to the desire for sovereign control over a territory by an incipient ruling class. It can unfold along a democratic trajectory, but it can also be perverted when the *demos* (people) of democracy is defined in narrow and exclusive terms, thus making space for communal hatred and political illiberality. The socialist movement in its origins had proclaimed an internationalist stance, summed up in Marx’s call to workers of all countries to unite. In late nineteenth century Europe, Marx and Engels recognized the complexities arising from the oppression of Ireland and Poland, and from the trajectories of German unification. After all, it was an incontrovertible fact that the contemporary world was dominated by multi-national entities such as the Ottoman, Tsarist, Hapsburg, Hohenzollern and British empires. The analysis of nationalism was inevitably complicated by the

⁵ The dictionary supplies the following definition of genocide: ‘The (attempted) deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the UN in December 1948 includes intentional as well as substantial aspects. See <http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm#II>

⁶ George Mosse, ‘Fascism and the French Revolution’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24/1 (1989), pp. 5–26, at p. 5. He continues: ‘The general will became a secular religion under the Jacobin dictatorship – the people worshipping themselves – while the political leadership sought to guide and formalize this worship. Fascism saw the French Revolution as a whole through the eyes of the Jacobin dictatorship’ (pp. 5–6).

need to take account of the democratic aspirations of the oppressed subjects of these empires.

Nationalism is a phenomenon almost impermeable by language. This is not least because of the desire of social scientists to pin a definition on something that is inextricably linked to historical accident, whim and sentiment – factors that cannot be grasped by axioms. The American President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points used the words *nation* and *nationality* interchangeably, and the phrase 'opportunity of autonomous development' to denote what was later to be termed 'self-determination.' (The latter slogan was a political imperative influenced by Russian social-democracy, which sought to rally oppressed peoples to the side of the working class in the struggle against Tsarist autocracy). In 1929, Karl Kautsky suggested that *nation* be used to designate the population of a state. 'The further east we go the more numerous are the portions of the population that do not wish to belong to it, that constitute national communities of their own within it. They too are called "nations" or "nationalities." It would be advisable to use only the latter term for them'.⁷ In 1913 Stalin defined it as 'a historically evolved stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture' – this definition dominated communist thinking for the crucial decades of the twentieth century.⁸ The French social theorist Ernst Renan (1823-1892) was clear that 'Religion cannot supply an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nationality.' He struggled to define it, only to conclude that 'A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle' – thereby implicitly recognizing the subjective element in national consciousness⁹

⁷ Cited in Horace B. Davies, *Towards a Marxist Theory of Nationalism* (New York, 1978) p. 6. The clear assumption here is that the nation is ethnically homogenous.

⁸ J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), Section 1
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03.htm>

⁹ Ernst Renan, *What is a Nation?* (1882). The essay is downloadable here:
<http://ig.cs.tu-berlin.de/oldstatic/w2001/eu1/dokumente/Basistexte/Renan1882EN-Nation.pdf>

As late as the 1940's however, the concept of a *nation* did not necessarily imply a delineation of sovereignty. For a long time it referred to an ethnically distinct people rather than a nation-state. And the term *ethnic* could be associated with race, nationality, or religion – markers of identity by which groups identify themselves and by which others recognize it. However, over the decades nationalism has taken the form of a new civic religion, a kind of replacement for the Divine Right of Kings. It has become the metaphysic of capitalism – the spiritual aspect of secular modernity.

Let us now examine the political language current at the time of its emergence (and that is still prevalent). This language is the vocabulary of *majority* and *minority* – words that carry vast meaning behind bland mathematics. It emerged in the period following the end of the Great War of 1914-1918. In 1919, the League of Nations established several nation-states, a marriage of space & ethnicity that proved a disaster. This fabricated institution was the launch-pad for the invention of 'minorities', entities that only came into existence because other, larger groups were deemed to be natural 'majorities'. The assumption that an ethnic group needed a clearly delineated territorial space as its natural home not only threw an abstraction in the face of complex and mixed demographic reality, it invented a new 'common sense' that was bound to cause political friction amongst those denied such a space. Although the League of Nations tried to deal with the problem via the legal arrangements known as the Minority Treaties, the international order was simply incapable of enforcing them. The result was that the rising ultra-nationalist forces of the 1920's and 30's – whose politics consisted essentially of incitement of racial hatred – could openly renege on these agreements; and in any case, deploy arithmetical vocabulary to buttress their violent practices. The Fascist/Nazi onslaught on democracy could present itself as 'truly' democratic, because it represented 'the majority.' Those denied nation-states, i.e., nationally frustrated population(s)' now became

firmly convinced - as was everybody else - that true freedom, true emancipation and true popular sovereignty could be attained only with full

national emancipation, that people without their own national government were deprived of human rights.. those peoples to whom states were not conceded, no matter whether they were official minorities or only nationalities, considered the Treaties an arbitrary game which handed out rule to some and servitude to others... The real significance of the Minority Treaties lies not in their practical application but in the fact that they were guaranteed by an international body, the League of Nations... The Minority Treaties said in plain language what until then had been only implied in the working system of nation-states, namely, that only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions, that persons of different nationality needed some law of exception until or unless they were completely assimilated... the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation had been completed; the nation had conquered the state, national interest had priority over law long before Hitler could pronounce “right is what is good for the German people. Here again the language of the mob was only the language of public opinion cleansed of hypocrisy and restraint.”¹⁰

With the advent of the nation-state, the state ceased to be an instrument of law, and became instead an instrument of the Nation. This distinction is very important, because it enables us to recognize the ideological means whereby the very basis of liberal democracy, viz., the equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of differences in ethnic origin, religious belief or sex, can be eroded. The retreat of universal democratic values before a creeping national chauvinism that speaks the language of ‘glory’ and ‘majority rule’ was a feature of the growth of Nazism in the late 1920’s when, as Franz Neumann observed in his classic study of Nazism, ‘in the centre of the counter-revolution stood the judiciary.’¹¹ We

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (1948), New York, 2004, (pp 347-351). See also Mark Mazower; *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*; London, 1999

¹¹ Franz Neumann; ‘Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism’; New York; 1963, p 27. A pdf file may be read here: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NeumannFranz-1942-00027>

have seen such developments unfold in India as well, when judges indulge in florid metaphysical phrases such as ‘collective conscience of the nation.’ The distinction also provides a clue to the ease with which hooliganism in the name of ‘the majority’ can and does present itself as nationalism, whereas violent activities of other denominational or political groups are denounced as ‘anti-national.’ Thus, in the same chapter, Neumann describes how in the 1920’s, courts would award the gravest punishments to left-wing cadre, whilst being extraordinarily lenient to Nazis. Analysing the meaning of such judgments, he goes on to say:

(The counter revolution) ‘...tried many forms and devices, but soon learned that it could come to power only with the help of the state machine and never against it... the Kapp Putsch of 1920 and the Hitler Putsch of 1923 had proved this... In the centre of the counter revolution stood the judiciary. Unlike administrative acts, which rest on considerations of convenience and expediency, judicial decisions rest on law, that is on right and wrong, and they always enjoy the limelight of publicity. Law is perhaps the most pernicious of all weapons in political struggles, precisely because of the halo that surrounds the concepts of right and justice... ‘Right’, Hocking has said, ‘is psychologically a claim whose infringement is met with a resentment deeper than the injury would satisfy, a resentment that may amount to passion for which men will risk life and property as they would never do for an expediency’. When it becomes ‘political’, justice breeds hatred and despair among those it singles out for attack. Those whom it favours, on the other hand, develop a profound contempt for the very value of justice, they know that it can be purchased by the powerful. As a device for strengthening one political group at the expense of others, for eliminating enemies and assisting political allies, law then threatens the fundamental convictions upon which the tradition of our civilization rests...’¹²

¹² Neumann, *ibid.*, p 27

The ramifications of these developments were far-reaching. Foremost among them was the institutional justification bestowed upon the ideology of majoritarianism, that is, the belief that a nation was by definition a homogeneous entity, further that it was entitled to a national home called the nation-state, and that ethnic groups which were not part of 'the majority' were a *problem*, or a *question*. It was not enough that the inhabitants of a certain area were entitled to democratic governance and equal protection of the law. It was also deemed necessary that the inhabitants should be ethnically unified. Since in real life no such homogeneity existed, the way was cleared for projects of purification – and these came to be undertaken according to and in the name of ancient traditions, culture, religion etc; all claiming the right to define what the *nation* was, or ought to be. Heterogeneity thus became a fabricated issue, and sooner or later, the *minority* or *minorities* were identified as the very embodiment of this heterogeneity. Liberal nationalists sought to protect them, chauvinist nationalists sought to intimidate them. Either way, a new form of tyranny was embarked upon, under the emblem: might is right.

Communalism and nationalism

The concept of the nation-state as defined by the dominant international order entered the Indian anti-imperialist movement almost by default. And those engaged in mobilising a conservative constituency tended to define the nation in terms of religious denomination – religion became a badge of identity rather than a source of moral or spiritual guidance. The relationship between religious revivalism, reform and communal politics is complex and deserves separate attention.¹³

Suffice it to note that in the late nineteenth century, the idea of the Hindu nation began to be articulated (the word *nation* still referred to an ethnically distinct

¹³ These arguments are developed in my articles 'Tremors of Intent: Perceptions of the Nation and Community in Contemporary India', in Ania Loomba & Suvir Kaul (eds). *On India: Oxford Literary Review*, vol 16(1-2), 1994; and 'Communalism in Modern India: A theoretical examination' (Mainstream, December 13, 1986). See <http://www.sacw.net/article2760.html>

people rather than a nation-state). The reformist aspirations of the intelligentsia became increasingly political, and as the century progressed, outstanding literateurs took the distinctive step of naming India as naturally Hindu. By implication, Muslims began to be depicted as essentially alien.¹⁴

The twentieth century saw major developments in national political consciousness. These began with the Swadeshi agitation, the first mass campaign of modern Indian nationalism, which was directed against the partition of Bengal in 1905. A revolutionary terrorist movement emerged in Bengal; and elite landed interests set up the Muslim League in 1906. This was followed in 1909 by the grant of separate electorates for Muslims under the reforms of 1909 – a fateful measure that institutionalized communal categories and forms of mobilization. An upsurge of mass nationalist consciousness took place during and immediately after the First World War, manifested in the agitations of the Home Rule Leagues and the non-cooperation and Khilafat movements of 1919–1924. However, Gandhi's endorsement of the pan-Islamist assertions of a section of Muslim clergy during Khilafat strengthened the stereotypical concept of a 'Muslim interest', and gave the clergy political leverage in nationalist agitation. Composite and territorial nationalism developed schisms in the mid 1920s.¹⁵ The period saw the setting up of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915 and also the Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the Muslim League in 1916.

As the national movement progressed, the definition of democracy as 'the rule of the majority' became a commonplace. Although *majority* remains an empty term

¹⁴ For different accounts of the emergence of Hindu nationalism, see Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1992); Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras* (New Delhi, 1997); and Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (Delhi, 2003).

¹⁵ A critical assessment may be read in Hamza Alavi, 'Ironies of History: Contradictions of the Khilafat Movement,' in Mushirul Hasan, ed., *Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond* (New Delhi, 1998); also available at: <http://hamzaalavi.com/?p=86>. For further reading on nationalism see David Hardiman; *Gandhi in His Time and Ours* (Delhi, 2003), esp. Chapters 2 and 7, 'An Incorporative Nationalism' and 'Fighting Religious Hatreds'. Also see Tejani, *Indian Secularism*.

until we know what we are counting, the increasingly accepted usage was that we were counting religious communities. All other features of democratic governance, such as an independent judiciary, free press and the rule of law became subservient to the phrase ‘rule of the majority’. Ergo, long before independence, the popular assumption was that democracy was about numbers, rather than liberty. Religious arithmetic became the most significant factor in politics. This enabled various chauvinists to articulate their prejudices via an international legal principle. Thus, in the historical period unmistakably stamped by the nihilist politics of Adolf Hitler, V. D. Savarkar was being quoted approvingly by the Nazi press: ‘A Nation is formed by a majority living therein. What did the Jews do in Germany? They being in minority were driven out from Germany.’¹⁶ And in one of his presidential addresses to the Hindu Mahasabha, he declared:

...just as in America, Germany, China and every other country not excluding Russia, so also in Hindusthan, *the Hindus by the fact that they form an overwhelming majority are the Nation and Moslems are but a community* because like all other communities they are unchallengeably in a *minority*. Therefore, they must remain satisfied with whatever reasonable safeguards other minorities in India get and accept as reasonable in the light of the *world formula framed by the League of Nations...* ¹⁷ (Emphases added)

The language of the Muslim League in the period of its resurgence was equally suffused with *majority* and *minority* – the object being the assertion of a more acceptable status (in its view) for the ‘Muslim majority’ provinces. Thus, in a

¹⁶ Speech at Malegaon, October 14, 1938. Cited in Marzia Casolari, ‘Hindutva’s Foreign Tie-up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35/4 (Jan. 22–28, 2000), pp. 218–28, at 223–224. Available online at <http://www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/casolari.pdf>

¹⁷ From Savarkar’s Kanpur address in *Hindu Rashtra Darshan*, pp. 122–25; a collection of presidential speeches: <http://liberalpartyofindia.org/communal/Hindu-Rashtra-Darshan.pdf>; p 123

speech at the Aligarh Muslim University in early 1941, M.A. Jinnah President of the Muslim League averred that:

...as a self-respecting people, we in the Muslim minority provinces say boldly that we are prepared to undergo every suffering and sacrifice for the emancipation and liberation of our brethren in regions of Muslim majority. By standing in their way and dragging them along with us into a united India we do not in any way improve our position. Instead, we reduce them also to the position of a minority. But we are determined that, whatever happens to us, we are not going to allow our brethren to be vassalized by the Hindu majority.¹⁸

Many scholars use prefixes such as *Hindu* and *Muslim* when speaking of communalism. Some speak only of majorities and minorities. The main problems blocking the comprehension of communalism in South Asia arise out of ideological angles of vision. On the one hand it is seen as something distinct from and opposed to nationalism. In addition, it is seen through a denominational lens, as if to conceive it as a sum of discrete entities, viz., Hindu, Muslim or Sikh communalism. It is quite appropriate to make distinctions of this kind, but such textured analyses enhance our understanding only if there is something in common among the entities to begin with. Otherwise, why use the category 'communal' at all?¹⁹

Communalism is not an arithmetical total of assorted fanaticisms, but a singular political style with different manifestations; a generic ideology, with different expressions. In colonial India, *communalism* referred to the idea that shared religious beliefs imply shared political interests. But Indians also possessed

¹⁸ J. Ahmad, *Speeches and Writings of Mr. Jinnah*, Vol.1, p.267; cited in Venkat Dhulipala; 'Debating Pakistan in Late Colonial North India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48/3; 2011

¹⁹ Until the late 1980's, the MA syllabus for modern Indian history at the University of Delhi included a separate paper on Muslim Politics. Communal politics of other hues were under-recognised or ignored.

affiliations related to caste, region and language. As religious modes of identification were given increasing administrative and political significance by British colonial power after the 1857 rebellion, a specific ideology developed around an assumed political interest. Who were the groups making these assumptions, and when and why did their theories carry conviction? It is these questions that need exploring, answers to which may lead to a better understanding. Communalism implied a goal, not a reality, and *communal* ideologies imagined an ideal religious unity - it would be pointless to ask Hindus or Muslims to 'unite' if they were already unanimous.²⁰

When the nation was defined in religious terms, communalism and nationalism got mixed together. Confronted with the immense complexity of identity formation in colonial India, it placed Indian thinkers and political activists in a conceptual marshland (of their own making) that generated painful consequences during colonial decline. If 'communalism' is one thing, and 'nationalism' another, then of course (from within the prevailing nation-statist perspective) the community interests of 'the Hindus', could be represented as nothing more than a positive version of nationalism. In any case, the idea that a nation-state comprised a *majority* plus *minorities* was buttressed by reigning concepts in international law. By the late 1930's, the tortuous negotiations between the major national parties saw the Muslim League also adopting the term *nation* to define its interest – if 'the Hindus' were 'a nation by themselves', as V.D. Savarkar, President of the Hindu Mahasabha liked to say,²¹ so were 'the Muslims.' This was an effort to turn the tables on the Congress in the ongoing negotiations about a future constitution by rejecting the status of a minority, and by insisting that the nationalism of the Congress was a thinly disguised version of Hindu majoritarianism. The assertion that there was a 'Muslim nation' in India

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this theme, see 'Communalism in Modern India: A theoretical examination' (Mainstream, December 13, 1986).). See <http://www.sacw.net/article2760.html>

²¹ On August 15, 1943, Savarkar (President of the Hindu Mahasabha from 1937 to 1943) declared: 'I have no quarrel with Mr. Jinnah's two-nation theory. We Hindus are a nation by ourselves and it is a historical fact that Hindus and Muslims are two nations'. (Indian Annual Register; 1943, vol 2, p 10).

implied that any future negotiations among the major parties would have to be an exchange between equals, rather than a parley between a minority and a majority. The locus of conflicting communal power-relations was thus pushed towards the domain of international law. As far as the ideological format of the nation-state was concerned, however, nothing had changed. Another territory was to be demarcated as a national home, and new minorities created.

Communists and the nation

The British communist, Rajni Palme Dutt (1896-1974) who for many years functioned as an intellectual mentor to the CPI, wrote a book titled *India Today* in 1940, which reappeared in an Indian revised edition in 1949.²² Dutt recognized the colonial ‘methods of playing off Hindus and Muslims (287) against each other’ and the ‘modern technique of communal electorates’ to place communalism in ‘the forefront of Indian politics’. He noted the colonial anxiety at the officially reported ‘unprecedented fraternization between Hindus and Muslims’ (315). He characterized the Khilafat movement as ‘in form the protest against the Treaty of Sevres to Turkey, the leading Moslem Power, but in practice the rallying point of Moslem mass unrest’ (317), thus dodging the implicit query about religious symbolism and mass unrest. Dutt attacked non-violence as ‘a cover conscious or unconscious, for the maintenance of class exploitation’ (329). He noted that ‘the attempted artificial division of the Indian people into two “nations” on the basis of religion is in reality reactionary, unpractical and contrary to the interests of democratic liberty’ (430) and supported the Declaration of Rights adopted by the Indian National Congress in 1931 – declaring it to be ‘correctly based on the foundation of equal democratic citizenship without distinction of caste, creed or sex’ (430). However he then took note of the ‘newly emerging questions of regional or national claims to autonomy or self-determination, which in the recent period became temporarily entangled with the Hindu-Moslem issue’ (430). After relating the history of Congress-

²² R. Palme Dutt; *India Today*; Bombay, 1940, (revised) 1947, 1949. Page references are from this publication.

League relations and Jawaharlal Nehru's arrogance in 1937, he remarked that 'the growth of the Moslem League reflected the failure of the Congress to make any serious consistent effort to reach out and appeal to the Moslem masses' (435). This observation was in marked contrast to the CPI's criticism of the Muslim mass contact programme of the Congress as a project 'rightly seen by the Muslim League as a move to destroy their organization.'²³

Dutt's positions rambled and changed with fast-evolving political developments. Within India however, communists were to adopt a fateful stance. In September 1942, the senior leader and theoretician G Adhikari placed a resolution before his party, titled *On Pakistan and National Unity*. The resolution was ratified in 1943, and along with a lengthier explanatory report with the same title, remained the CPI position on Indian politics for the crucial period 1943-1947. The documents are significant because of the way they conflate religious and non-religious identities, together with the arithmetical vocabulary of minority/ majority. Thus, the Resolution called for 'all-in national unity based on communal harmony', for which a united national front (UNF) was the need of the hour. It insisted that 'in Free India, there will be perfect equality between nationalities and communities that live together in India.' It then asked for the national movement to recognise 'the following rights as part of its programme for national unity':

3 (a) Every section of the Indian people which has a contiguous territory as its homeland, common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological make-up and common economic life would be recognised as a distinct nationality with the right to exist as an autonomous state within the free Indian union or federation and will have the right to secede from it if it may so desire. This means that the territories which are homelands of such and which today are split up by the artificial boundaries of the present British provinces and of the so-called "Indian States" would be re-united and restored to them in free India. Thus, free India of tomorrow

²³ G. Adhikari, ed., *Pakistan and National Unity* (Bombay, 1943), p 28

would be a federation or union of autonomous states of the various nationalities such as the Pathans, Western Punjabis (dominantly Muslims), Sikhs, Sindhis, Hindustanis, Rajasthanis, Gujeratis, Bengalis, Assamese, Beharis, Oriyas, Andhras, Tamils, Karnatakis, Maharashtrians, Keralas, etc.

(b) If there are interspersed minorities in the new states thus formed their rights regarding their culture, language, education, etc., would be guaranteed by Statute and their infringement would be punishable by law...

4. Such a declaration of rights inasmuch as it conceded to every nationality as defined above, and therefore, to nationalities having Muslim faith, the right of autonomous state existence and of secession, can form the basis for unity between the National Congress and the League. For this would give to the Muslims wherever they are in an overwhelming majority in a contiguous territory which is their homeland, the right to form their autonomous states and even to separate if they so desire. In the case of the Bengali Muslims of the Eastern and Northern Districts of Bengal where they form an overwhelming majority, they may form themselves into an autonomous region – the state of Bengal or may form a separate state. Such a declaration therefore concedes the just essence of the Pakistan demand and has nothing in common with the separatist theory of dividing India into two nations on the basis of religion.

5. But the recognition of the right of separation in this form need not necessarily lead to actual separation. On the other hand, by dispelling the mutual suspicions, it brings about unity of action today and lays the basis for a greater unity in the free India of tomorrow.²⁴

²⁴ G. Adhikari, ed., *Pakistan and National Unity* (Bombay, 1943) p. 14-15. Page references are from this publication. The full text of the Resolution may be read at

A close reading of these documents raises fundamental issues concerning socialism and nationalism in India. My concern here is to point to the CPI's erratic conflation of nation, nationality, sub-regional and religious identity; its refusal to theorise communal politics, and its resultant decision to support what it called the 'democratic core' or the 'just essence' of the Pakistan demand. Thus, it saw the Khilafat movement as a reflection of an 'upsurge of the Muslim nationalities in the East' (p. 21), although later in the text it referred to Pan-Islamism as a 'reactionary separatist theory', a 'weapon of disunity' that uttered slogans of 'extra-territorial loyalty' (p. 41). It characterised the emergence of linguistic or regional demands as an expression of 'multi-national consciousness' (p. 27), and compared the British colony in India to the multi-national Tsarist Empire. It supported 'the demand of every nationality for self-determination' (p. 27) and saw its acceptance as a basis for 'revolutionary Hindu Muslim unity' (p. 38).

Adhikari's Report observed that 'the guarantee by the Congress of the right of self-determination of Muslim nationalities... should mean for the Muslim peoples not separation from the rest of India but a more glorious and more lasting unity within a free Indian Union, in which all – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – are equal partners (p. 44). It stated that in 1938 the CPI had not understood 'the real nature of the communal problem' which it was now correcting (p. 29). Placing the word *communal* sometimes in quotation-marks and sometimes without, it stated that:

To the ordinary patriot, this new aspect of the communal problem, as a problem of multi-national consciousness, has not yet become patent. We, the Communists, are able to see our way into the future by means of our theory and our ideology. By means of this, we are able to quickly see these elements in the present which are bound to develop in the future. (p. 27)

The CPI 'saw in the growth of the Muslim League not the growth of communalism, but the rise of anti-imperialist nationalist consciousness among the Muslim masses' (p. 29). It even attacked the Muslim mass contact programme of the Congress which it claimed, 'was rightly seen by the Muslim League as a move to destroy their organization.' (p. 28). By this logic even communists would need to refrain from working with Muslim workers. By giving 'nationalist' credence to an assertion of communal representation, it bestowed legitimacy to similar claims emanating from Hindu nationalists. The CPI also supported the League's critique of the 1928 Motilal Nehru Report (on the future constitution) on the grounds that residual powers in a future Indian constitution ought to vest with the states and not the centre (p. 29). Continuing with this line of thought, it argued:

Their (the Muslim League's) conception of the federation for a free India was a federation of autonomous and sovereign states. Why? Because the Muslim League wanted autonomy for regions in which Muslim nationalities like Sindhis, Pathans, Punjabis, Eastern Bengal Muslims lived. It was a just democratic demand. This really is the crux and kernel of all the so-called "communal" demands raised by the Muslim League right from its inception up to the present time when they have finally been crystallised into the demand for Pakistan'. (p. 29)

The document had no analysis of communal violence either, beyond the naive re-iteration that communal riots were 'engineered by goondas in the pay of dark forces of reaction' (p. 22). References to fascism were restricted to the war, wherein the USSR was on the Allied side. It is significant that September 1942 inaugurated the darkest hour for the Red Army, with the battle of Stalingrad having begun in late August. The CPI spoke about 'saving India from fascism', but only in the sense of warding off an Axis victory. *Pakistan and National Unity* is a dense and highly confusing document. The reader can only guess at the impact it made on the Communist cadre. The only awareness of the implications of mixing

up regional and religious identity occurs in a paragraph referring to 'the Muslim masses' fear of oppression and exploitation by 'Hindu India'. An explanation for this 'fear' was provided thus: 'uneven bourgeois development creates conditions wherein one dominant nationality may be in a position to stifle the growth of less developed and weaker nationalities in a free India. We saw tiny germs of this even during the Congress Ministries...such a fear is an understandable fear' (p. 38). This formulation implied that 'the Hindus' were a 'dominant nationality'. It showed no awareness of the implication of its own arguments, viz., that if people united by language and culture could still be distinguished as Muslim Punjabis and Muslim Bengalis, the same could be said of Hindu Punjabis and Hindu Bengalis. And if certain 'nationalities' could be described as 'dominantly Muslim', why were others not referred to as 'dominantly Hindu'?

Four years later, in the midst of the traumatic violence of 1947, the communists waged a courageous but futile struggle for non-violence and communal amity. It's commentary upon the happenings in Punjab as evidenced on the Dhanwantri Report have been noted. However, the Appeal to the People of Pakistan (issued on August 15, 1947) in the name of 'Communists in Pakistan' demonstrated a sad awareness (short of an acknowledgement) of the convoluted logic of the arguments on 'self-determination' that it had presented in 1942 and 1943.²⁵ On its first page the Appeal recognised that 'the progressive forces' had 'not been strong enough' to defeat the policy of the upper classes in alliance with imperialism to preach communal hatred and foster separatism. It argued against Dominion status and the influence of the princely states, and for a constitution based on 'firm democratic principles.' And in 1948, a year after independence, it clearly regretted its previous stance (without saying so). A 'Communist Party Publication' printed in Bombay under the title *Who Rules Pakistan?* had this to say:

²⁵ 'August 15 - To the People of Pakistan: Communist Party's Appeal'; File CPI-117; PC Joshi Archive

The year of freedom that has passed thus reveals that the people of Pakistan, whose religious feelings were exploited by the vested interests to reach to posts of power, are being cheated, betrayed and sold in economic and political bondage to the imperialists...The fake freedom and fake leadership have been unmasked in the last one year...the people of Pakistan, like the people of India, have yet to liberate themselves and save their country from being sold to foreign exploiters.. the Communist Party of Pakistan...carries on this fight for uniting the people in a common Democratic Front ²⁶

The theoretical statements of the CPI in the 1940's show that it had not worked out the distinctions and usages of the terms *nation* and *nationality*, and that it remained attached to the nineteenth century concept of the nation-state. Despite its undoubtedly humanist approach towards (and work for) communal amity, and its dismay at the upsurge of communal warfare in 1947, communists adopted a confused and inconsistent approach towards communalism. It is arguable that this has continued over the decades and has had a detrimental impact upon the fortunes of the left as well as upon the political discourse of civil society in South Asia.

B.R. Ambedkar's observations on Pakistan

The arguments presented by BR Ambedkar in 1940 and 1945 stand in marked contrast to the theoretical sophistry of the CPI. His book *Pakistan or the Partition of India* is arguably the most substantial and well-argued contemporary analysis of the competing discourses on partition.²⁷ Relying on his own discernment rather than a set of doctrinal axioms, Ambedkar laid out the logic of communal politics. He used Ernst Renan's arguments to stress the subjective element in nationalism, made distinctions between *nation* and *people*; the nation

²⁶ *Who Rules Pakistan?* (Communist Party Publication, Bombay, 1948), File CPI/147; P.C. Joshi Archive

²⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan, or the Partition of India* (Bombay, 1946). The first edition appeared in 1940 as *Thoughts on Pakistan*. A pdf copy of the book is available here: <http://www.satnami.com/pakistan.pdf> > Numbered citations of Ambedkar's views refer to the 1946 edition of this book.

as a collective passion or belief versus the nation in the *de jure* or *de facto* sense, by which we may assume he was referring to the element of sovereignty that marked the nation-state. He was clear that even the recognition that India Muslims were a nation was not a sufficient argument for a partition into two sovereign states. He placed great significance on the matter of communal ideologies influencing the armed forces. He presented a compelling argument against the logic of separation as well as a realistic assessment of the futility of reason as a means of preventing it. Citing examples from Canada, South Africa and Switzerland, he characterized the formation of communal parties by 'minority nations' as a 'vicious method of self-protection.' The best way of avoiding the tyranny of the majority, Ambedkar argued, was to put a 'ban on communal parties in politics' (144). Speaking of the desirability of a united non-communal party, he said Jinnah himself would have been the most qualified to lead it. Instead, he had devoted himself to a futile and harmful policy that was a perversion from the original intent of the League (144,146).

What is significant is the common-sense of the times reflected in Ambedkar's vocabulary. This is visible in his ambivalent usages of the word *nation*, the frequent appearance of terms such as 'the Hindu case' and 'the Muslim case', and the numerical terminology of nation-statist demography - viz., *majority* and *minority*. Notwithstanding this, he was able to place a compelling argument from the assumed standpoint of 'the Muslim interest', *against* the idea of a separate nation-state. He cited the resolution of the Muslim League at its annual session held at Patna in December 1938, that decried the Federation scheme embodied in the Government of India Act, 1935 as unacceptable, whilst yet authorizing its President 'to adopt such course as may be necessary with a view to explore the possibility of a suitable alternative which will safeguard the interests of the Musalmans and other minorities in India...' (145). By these resolutions, Ambedkar argued,

Mr. Jinnah showed that he was for a common front between the Muslims and other non-Muslim minorities. Unfortunately, the catholicity and

statesmanship that underlies these resolutions did not last long. In 1939 Mr. Jinnah took a somersault and outlined the dangerous and disastrous policy of isolation of the Musalmans by passing that notorious resolution in favour of Pakistan. What is the reason for this isolation? Nothing but the change of view that the Musalmans were a nation and not a community!! One need not quarrel over the question whether the Muslims are a nation or a community. But one finds it extremely difficult to understand how the mere fact that the Muslims are a nation makes political isolation a safe and sound policy? Unfortunately Muslims do not realize what disservice Mr. Jinnah has done to them by this policy. But let Muslims consider what Mr. Jinnah has achieved by making the Muslim League the only organization for the Musalmans. It may be that it has helped him to avoid the possibility of having to play the second fiddle. For inside the Muslim camp he can always be sure of the first place for himself. But how does the League hope to save by this plan of isolation the Muslims from Hindu Raj? Will Pakistan obviate the establishment of Hindu Raj in Provinces in which the Musalmans are in a minority? Obviously it cannot. This is what would happen in the Muslim minority Provinces if Pakistan came. Take an all-India view. Can Pakistan prevent the establishment of Hindu Raj at the centre over Muslim minorities that will remain Hindustan? It is plain that it cannot. What good is Pakistan then? Only to prevent Hindu Raj in Provinces in which the Muslims are in a majority and in which there could never be Hindu Raj!! To put it differently Pakistan is unnecessary to Muslims where they are in a majority because there, there is no fear of Hindu Raj. It is worse than useless to Muslims where they are in a minority, because Pakistan or no Pakistan they will have to face a Hindu Raj. Can politics be more futile than the politics of the Muslim League? The Muslim League started to help minority Muslims and has ended by espousing the cause of majority Muslims. What a perversion in the original aim of the Muslim League! What a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous! Partition as a remedy against Hindu Raj is worse than useless (146).

However, although Ambedkar was clear in his disagreement with the idea of separation, he adopted a realist stance to the demand and sought to draw out its implications:

...The question that concerns the Hindus is: How far does the creation of Pakistan remove the communal question from Hindustan? That is a very legitimate question and must be considered. It must be admitted that by the creation of Pakistan, Hindustan is not freed of the communal question. While Pakistan can be made a homogeneous state by redrawing its boundaries, Hindustan must remain a composite state. The Musalmans are scattered all over Hindustan – though they are mostly congregated in towns – and no ingenuity in the matter of redrawing of boundaries can make it homogeneous. *The only way to make Hindustan homogeneous is to arrange for exchange of population.* Until that is done, it must be admitted that even with the creation of Pakistan, the problem of majority *vs.* minority will remain in Hindustan as before and will continue to produce disharmony in the body politic of Hindustan (p. 54) (Emphasis added).

Ambedkar's chilling suggestion - argued at some length - that 'the only effective way of solving the minorities problem lay in exchange of population' (p. 53) was a logical argument based upon the concept of homogeneity as the accepted format of a modern nation.²⁸ The fact that he saw this as a feasible procedure: 'After all, the population involved is inconsiderable and because some obstacles require to be removed, it would be the height of folly to give up so sure a way to communal peace.' (p.53) is a sobering pointer to the sheer weight of the ideology of nation-states.

²⁸ For a detailed account of Ambedkar's views on Pakistan, see my article 'The Law of Killing: a brief history of Indian fascism'; in Jairus Banaji, (ed), 'Fascism: Essays on Europe and India', Gurgaon, 2013

Sovereignty and annihilation

Colonial India's elites (including its imperial governors) discovered long ago how easy it was to inflame popular sentiment; and how communal violence was the most potent means of stalling social and political transformation. Communalism was and remains the Indian version of the totalitarian principle or drive in Indian politics. More specifically, it is India's fascist movement.²⁹ As in Europe of the 1920's and 30's this drive seized upon the nation-state as the ideological and institutional platform upon which to enact the theatre of seizing power in the name of the nation. Undoubtedly class and traditional elite interests were at work in these processes, but fascism was and remains a mass movement, that can and has been known to overtake the control of elites who support it.³⁰ The liberal-democratic vision of the newly-established nation-states was imperiled at the outset by the ideal of a national home for homogeneously defined nations, which provided fertile ground for the discourse of victim-hood and revenge to thrive, and for its proponents to invade the public sphere with violence and hooliganism. In Europe the institutional structures and boundaries of these states had been laid down in 1919. Thus, even when the ultra-nationalist movements sought to alter these boundaries (as in Hitler's infamous imperial drive for *lebensraum*), when it came to the targeting of *minorities*, the main focus of these totalitarian movements was on political groups such as the communists and socialists, and ethnic ones, primarily the Jews and Romani. As regards the former, their existence within European civilization had for long been rendered precarious by the centuries-old tradition of anti-Semitism.

However in late-colonial India the situation was different – here a colonized territory was undergoing a transition to independence that was complicated by contending visions and programmes of the sought-for nation-state. Here there was a plurality of actors seeking hegemony and contending for sovereignty in a

²⁹ See *ibid*, 'The Law of Killing'

³⁰ See Arthur Rosenberg, 'Fascism as a Mass-Movement', *Historical Materialism*, Volume 20, Issue 1, 2012. A pdf copy is available here: <http://www.sacw.net/article2756.html>

highly differentiated society. The growth of totalitarian politics in India took place within a broader political terrain that included liberal and social democratic movements and ideas. Thus, the national movement and the accompanying anti-imperialist sentiment was simultaneously the ground for the crystallization of conservative mobilisation around communal projects such as the Hindu nation and the Muslim nation. The ideological osmosis between communal groups and moderate organizations ensured that the former exercised political leverage in the latter. The binary inter-dependence and symbiotic nature of Hindu-Muslim communal discourse ensured that each strengthened the other and spoke the language of minority/majority to make claims upon the future constitution.

All this was accompanied by severe communal tension and violence in the 1920's and 30's. The situation was further complicated by the advent of world war and the machinations of a beleaguered empire. The resultant breakdown of the nationalist conversation was not a foregone conclusion, but a likely one. The communist left was so closely tied to Stalinist thought and Soviet strategic interests that it proved itself incapable of addressing the communal question in any terms other than the arithmetical discourse of the times. The attainment of a separated sovereignty by the 'Muslim majority' provinces of colonial India was a conclusion that left it in disarray, given the fact that just four years prior to independence, the CPI had advocated 'national self-determination' for these 'dominantly Muslim' areas as a step that would strengthen 'revolutionary Hindu-Muslim unity.'

One consequence of these has been the impact of sovereignty on critical thought, especially concerning the understanding of communalism. For many years, 'India' has been conceptualized as if the vast swathe that was to be renamed 'Pakistan' simply did not exist, and had never existed - its existence was wiped off retroactively from history as well. This was regardless of the fact that a powerful movement speaking the language of a fabricated monolith called 'the Muslim interest' had emerged during the second world war, and had for a while successfully co-opted certain left-wing cadre as well, with the help of the CPI.

Sovereignty became a means of annihilation – not only literally, but theoretically. A movement that prided itself on its internationalism was reduced to helpless sophist pleading on behalf of one pole of communal radicalism, in ignorance of the ideological effect this might have, viz., the provision of legitimacy to the concept of a Hindu Nation. Thereafter the situation could only worsen. Today, when even high-ranking members of Pakistan's elite may be assassinated for the mere suggestion that the blasphemy law needs revision, it is difficult to imagine any significant communist activism in Pakistan on behalf of an internationalist workers movement.

The idea has become endemic that the endless multiplication of sovereignty (rather than a democratic constitution that can hold heterogeneity) is a solution to social and political problems. As we have seen, by the 1940's the concept of nationhood had become irreparably tied to the sense of a communal *lebensraum*. The impact of all this, along with the conflation of ethnicity with religion, was felt amongst smaller communities as well. Thus, in a little-known reaction to what was happening in North India, a pamphlet entitled 'Zoram Independent' was distributed in Aizawl, Mizoram, in May 1947, advocating independence for the Mizo hill tracts. It read:

Every nation in the world strives for independence. India has struggled long.. So have the Muslims of India for their independence. If the Mizo does not fight for their independence, they will remain slaves. We should fight for independence to avoid becoming slaves again. The fact that we speak one language (which proves that we are one people) is reason enough for us to strive for independence... all of us will be happy because then we will be working for our own future... Because of our religion alone we should be away from the Indians. All around us, different religious groups seem to form their own countries. The Burmese are Buddhists. The

Indians are Hindus and the Pakistanis Muslims. Why should not we Mizos who are Christians have our own sovereign country. ³¹

The marriage of ethnicity to territory was a disaster from the outset (this has been proven in the re-organized states of India's North East as well), not only because it imposed a thoroughly impractical and formal abstraction upon the reality of mixed populations, but also because it provided legitimacy to forms of nationalist discourse that implied that *minorities* were a problem. In the political crises that engulfed the world between 1914 and after, many of these discourses lent themselves to 'final solutions' – the Nazi's grim euphemism for genocide. In the midst of the confusion, those who prided themselves on their scientific historical insight uncritically accepted the vacuous language of majoritarianism and the ideological linkage between democracy and the nation-state. As a Sri Lankan comrade told me in a private conversation, 'their only way of dealing with the oppression of a minority is to convert it into a majority by handing over to it territory in which it becomes a majority which can in turn oppress the new minority.' For socialists in any case there is the broader question of the domination of capital over the world economy, and the manner in which this domination is represented and reproduced as the essence of democracy. But that is a separate debate. The point at issue is not the autonomy of state power, but rather the exclusivist definition of 'the people' deemed to be sovereign.

The long shadow

In the bloodiest months of the newly independent dominions, the Communist Party of India issued a pamphlet paying 'homage to Mahatma Gandhi on his 79th birthday.'³² The preface spoke of how 'in his grand old age, the father of the nation has been fearlessly stirring the conscience of the nation on the most vital issues on which depends our future... by his personal intervention in defence of

³¹ Published as 'Love Mizoram', by D. Ronghaka, Imphal 1985, p. 41-42; and cited by Sajal Nag, in 'Construction of National Question in North-East India, 1946-1950', presented at the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, January, 1993.

³² 'On his 79th birthday – Our Homage and our Pledge'; File CPI-117; PC Joshi Archive, Jawaharlal Nehru University Library.

the Hindu minority in Noakhali, then of the Muslim minority in Calcutta and now in Delhi he has demonstrated how courage and confidence can be roused in the minority and a sense of shame in the majority for being misled by a handful of reactionary hate-mongers, and bonds of fraternity restored among the common people.. let us make the nations homage to Mahatma Gandhi the culmination of a peoples peace campaign in which Congressmen, Nationalist Muslims, Leaguers, and all Left parties and popular organizations participate.’³³ It quoted Gandhi on the most tragic feature of the partition then unfolding: ‘The transfer of population will be a fatal snare and it will mean nothing but greater misery. It is a shame for both. I claim myself to be equal servant of all. I wish India and Pakistan can unitedly make up their minds against the transfer of population.’³⁴ The preface ended with the hope that the Indian people would soon ‘be able to declare before millions of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Touchables and Untouchables, that the riot-demon stands buried and the minorities shall enjoy the protection of the living wall of the majority... thus alone can we defeat the anti-national communal reactionary. And play our proud role in shaping the destiny of the new world.’

Here too, the most humane of aspirations was cast in arithmetical language, invoking yet again, the ideal of the homogenous nation. Even the appeal to the basic values of human decency was made in sentences that reinforced the philosophy of number, unwittingly reproducing the terrible threat that always underlay it, the danger that a mere change in the nation’s mood could cause ‘the living wall of the majority’ to fall in a mass of destruction, carrying with it the lives and homes of millions. Ironically, communist cadres were among the few political activists in Punjab who spoke as human beings and not as members of an arithmetical category. Never was tragedy so latent in words as these moving salutations to a man whom their intellectual mentor R.P. Dutt had despised for having ‘appeared throughout as the active leader of Hinduism and of Hindu

³³ *ibid*, ‘On his 79th birthday’, p. 1-2

³⁴ *ibid*, ‘On his 79th birthday’, p. 6. Address at prayer gathering on Sept 13, 1947

revival.’³⁵ In 1947 however, Gandhi’s efforts on behalf of suffering humanity struck a chord with the comrades, who had themselves carried a torch for human values through the nightmare of ethnic cleansing in a country that was meant to be awakening to freedom.

‘There are events in the past’ (writes Nauman Naqvi), ‘when the catastrophe that is to come has already come to pass, indeed when that coming catastrophe has never ceased coming to pass. One such event is the ‘Partition’ of South Asia - that is, the moment of our ‘freedom’, our entry into modern political subjectivity, our entry into modern, historical life, pure and simple.’³⁶ Whatever be our assessment of the historical experience of the successor states of British India, it is undeniable that a great deal was lost with independence. I refer not just to the vast scale of the killing, the uprooting of ordinary people from their homes, the framing of millions of our own as eternal enemies of each other. Along with this extraordinary violence, people (most of all in the affected areas, but elsewhere as well) also lost the sense of trust and friendship, and even the capacity to disagree or be angry without dipping that disagreement or anger in the poison-well of communal hatred and communal stereotypes. What was lost was the very capacity to speak, other than as members of a majority or a minority, particles of this or that community, this or that nation. This is our plight today. This was the ‘coming catastrophe’ that ‘has never ceased coming to pass’, that lingers with us still, this was the outrage that caused Toba Tek Singh to throw his madness upon the ground and refuse a national identity. And it remains as true today as it was then, that the first step towards sanity is to see that catastrophe remains our habitation.

dil ke phaphole jal uthe seene ke daag se
is ghar ko aag lag gayi ghar ke chiraag se

³⁵ R. Palme Dutt; *India Today*; p. 437.

³⁶ Nauman Naqvi, ‘A Secret South Asian meta-utopia’, Seminar # 632, New Delhi, 2012

